

## **OPENING STATEMENT**

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HOUSE COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES

SUBCOMMITTEE ON INDIAN AND INSULAR AFFAIRS

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Chairwoman Hageman, Ranking Member Leger Fernandez, distinguished members of the Subcommittee: thank you for this opportunity to testify before you today. I am grateful for the bipartisan approach of this subcommittee regarding the Compacts of Free Association (COFA) with the Freely Associated States (FAS) – the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI), and the Republic of Palau – and understand that leaders in both chambers of Congress plan to introduce COFA-related legislation.

The United States and the FAS share deep ties forged in history. During World War II, the islands that encompass what are today the FAS saw some of the fiercest fighting in the Pacific Theater. After the war, the United Nations assigned the United States as the administering authority over the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands, which included what would become the FSM, RMI, and Palau. And in becoming sovereign nations, these three countries chose to maintain their close bonds with the United States through the Compacts.

From the post-WWII era, through the Cold War and its end, to the present day, the adversaries and threats associated with this region for the United States have changed. What's remained consistent is the U.S. commitment to the FAS, as demonstrated by the Compacts.

Underpinned by the Compacts, our partnerships with the FAS have formed a bedrock of U.S.-Pacific cooperation for nearly four decades. These agreements underscore both the enduring ties between our people and the vital U.S. national security interests at play in the Pacific; collectively, these three countries form a strategic bridge stretching from Hawai'i to the Philippines, an area that is geographically larger than the continental United States. Under the Compacts, the United States has full authority and responsibility for defense and security matters in and relating to the FAS. This investment is key to maintaining the stability and prosperity of our closest Pacific Island neighbors and partners.

The Compacts are at the core of the U.S. commitment to advancing a Pacific that is free and open. In its Pacific Partnership Strategy, the Biden Administration highlighted the importance of these agreements to broader U.S. engagement in the region, and why it has been critically important to successfully complete negotiations on the Compact-related agreements with the FSM, RMI, and Palau. To that end, I am proud of the tireless work of our team to conclude negotiations and finalize agreements that would extend Compact-related U.S. economic assistance for the FAS for another 20 years. On May 22, Finance Minister Kaleb Udui of Palau and I signed the 2023 Palau Compact Review Agreement during the U.S.-Pacific Islands Forum Leaders Dialogue in Port Moresby and, one day later, Charge d'affaires Alissa Bibbs signed three of the four Compact-related agreements with FSM Chief Negotiator Leo Falcam in Palikir. We signed the final agreement with FSM, the 2023 Federal Programs and Services Agreement, on September 28; our ability to work cooperatively on these agreements is a further reaffirmation of the close and continuing U.S.-Micronesia partnership. And earlier this week in Honolulu, the United States and the RMI signed three agreements: an agreement to amend our 2003 Amended Compact, a new Trust Fund Agreement, and a new Fiscal Procedures Agreement; getting to this point is a demonstration of the enduring U.S. commitment to the RMI. Negotiations continue with both the RMI and Palau on new Federal Programs and Services Agreements.

While these signings served as key milestones, the role of Congress in, as applicable, approving and providing authority and appropriations to implement these well-negotiated and mutually supported Compact-related agreements is essential. To that end, we applaud Congress for signaling their support for the FAS under the current Continuing Resolution, and similarly welcome the planned introduction of the Compact of Free Association Amendments Act of 2023. This legislation would allow the United States to maintain its status as the partner of choice among the FAS in the decades to come.

At a time when the strategic competitors of the United States seek to portray us as an unreliable partner in the Pacific, our enduring partnerships with the FAS – underpinned by the Compacts – serve as a compelling, tangible counterpoint. But these historic bonds should not be taken for granted, something that our adversaries are well aware of. This investment is key to ensuring that the

goodwill generated by decades of kinship between the United States and the FAS will continue to grow in the future.

With that, I look forward to discussing this important legislation with you.

Thank you.